

## O Captain! My Captain! (Walt Whitman)

- "O Captain! My Captain!" is an extended metaphor poem written by Walt Whitman in 1865 about the death of U.S. president Abraham Lincoln. Well received upon publication, the poem was Whitman's first to be anthologized and the most popular during his lifetime. Together with "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day", and "This Dust was Once the Man", it is one of four poems written by Whitman about the death of Lincoln.
- "My Captain" was first published in The Saturday Press on November 4, 1865, and appeared in Sequel to Drum-Taps later that year. He later included it in the collection Leaves of Grass and recited the poem at several lectures on Lincoln's death.
- "O Captain! My Captain!", "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", "Hush'd Be the Camps To-Day", and "This Dust Was Once the Man" were all written on Lincoln's death. While these poems do not specifically mention Lincoln, they turn the assassination of the President into a sort of martyrdom.
- It was also included in the 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass.
- Whitman revised the poem several times during his life,[28] including in his 1871 collection Passage to India.
- In 1892, The Atlantic wrote that "My Captain" was universally accepted as Whitman's "one great contribution to the world's literature".
- The elegy "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman was published in November 1865, about seven months after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. This is significant, as we'll get into later.
- It was an immediate success with the public, and many students had to memorize it. Contributing to this is the poem's basic structure—couplets with a standard meter and end-rhymes.
- Whitman didn't think the poem was worthy of all the attention it received. He came close to regretting that he'd written it.
  
- Lines 1-4  
*"O Captain! my Captain, our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;"*

The speaker is a crewman on a ship. He tells his Captain that their difficult trip is over and it's been a success. They're nearing the port, where a crowd waits to celebrate their return.

On a figurative level, the opening lines introduce the metaphorical comparisons in the poem:

The Captain is Abraham Lincoln.

The ship is America.

The "fearful trip" successfully completed is the Civil War.

The speaker also refers to "my" Captain, indicating a more personal relationship than that between a superior and subordinate.

- Lines 5-8  
*"But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead."*

The speaker reveals their success came at a high cost. The Captain is dead. The speaker is dejected.

The repetition of "heart" in the fifth line works to establish the speaker's grief over the Captain's death.

Figuratively, it could represent the nation's initial reaction to Lincoln's death.

There's a repetition of "my" Captain, emphasizing the feeling the speaker has for his superior.

- Lines 9-12

*"O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;"*

The speaker implores his Captain to get up because everything's for him. The bells, the music, the flowers, the wreaths and the flag are all for him. The gathered crowd is there to celebrate the Captain, and they can't wait to see him. The speaker shows denial by asking someone he knows is dead to "rise up". He can't fully accept that it's true.

Metaphorically, America celebrated President Lincoln after the Union's victory in the Civil War. The feeling was short-lived, as the celebratory feeling will be in these lines.

All of the things waiting at the dock work for a celebration and a funeral:

Bells and bugle trills can be used for a victory or for mourning.

A flag can be flown to give glory or at half-mast.

Bouquets, wreaths, and a gathered crowd are common to both events.

"My" Captain appears for the third time.

➤ Lines 13-16

*"Here Captain! dear father!  
The arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead."*

The crewman now refers to his Captain as "dear father", showing he viewed him as much more than a commanding officer. His denial continues as he says the Captain's death must be a dream.

As a metaphor, Lincoln is being called a "father"—he was more than a leader as well, as America looked to him as a father-figure. Many Americans would have found it hard to believe Lincoln was dead, thinking it must be a dream.

➤ Lines 17-20

*"My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;"*

The speaker isn't talking to his Captain now. He's beginning to accept that he's dead. The ship reaches port safely. He reaffirms that they've completed their objective.

Likewise, individual Americans would eventually accept that Lincoln was dead. The fact remains that the Civil War was successfully fought.

Again, the speaker says "my" Captain and adds "my" father. There's no doubt the speaker has lost much more than a commanding officer. The Captain has seen him through a difficult trip; his judgment has saved the speaker and the rest of the crew. He views himself as his Captain's son, as someone who was guided into maturity.

*"Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead."*

The crowd will celebrate the ship's triumphant return. The speaker, however, will mournfully walk the deck where his Captain died.

Similarly, the nation in general will rejoice over their victorious military campaign. Some, however, like the speaker, will be in mourning over Lincoln's death. This tragedy will overshadow the greater victory.

The last use of "my" Captain shows the speaker forgoing the celebration to continue mourning. He's not ready to live on his own, even though soon, he will have to.

How does the meaning of the refrain change?

The refrain, "fallen cold and dead", appears three times in the poem. It highlights the speaker's emotional journey as he deals with his Captain's death. It also brings the reader along, creating and then releasing the tension over whether this tragedy has really happened.

The first time it's stated is the first time we're told the Captain is dead. The speaker, though, doesn't accept this reality yet. In the next line, he asks his Captain to "rise up."

Similarly, the second time comes right after the speaker holds out hope that "it is some dream."

In the third and final instance, the speaker accepts what has happened. He has to deal with his grief before leaving the ship.

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### ➤ **Summary**

‘O Captain! My Captain!’ by Walt Whitman is a heart-touching elegy on the death of the American President Abraham Lincoln.

The speaker’s coming to terms with the death of his fallen comrade is the focal point of the poem at hand. At the start of the poem, the speaker attempts to come to reality as he observes his dead captain on the deck. Slowly and gradually, he realizes that the change is permanent and life must go, regardless. The end of the Civil War was supposedly a moment of rejoicing for the American populace, instead, it became an event of mourning. The conclusion of the Civil War has brought with itself national mourning and a period of reflection.

### ➤ **Captain! My Captain! Meaning**

The title of the poem, ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ refers to Abraham Lincoln as a captain of the ship. Here, the “ship” is a symbol of the civil war fought for liberating the slaves. According to the poet, the ship is sailing nearer to the shore, meaning the war is about to end. They have achieved their coveted goal. Being a moment of victory, everyone is happy. However, they have to consider, at the same time, that their metaphorical “captain” of the ship is no more. When he lived, he guided the multitude with his fatherly guidance. After his death, the nation is fatherless. In this agony, the poet writes the verses. However, the mood of the poem is not gloomy. Even if they have lost Lincoln, the dream Lincoln has seen is not lost.

### ➤ **Structure**

The poem, ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ consists of 3 stanzas in totality having 2 quatrains in each. A quatrain is a stanza consisting of four lines. Besides, this poem is an elegy. An elegy is known as a mourning poem. Apart from that, Whitman uses the free verse form while writing this poem. For this reason, the lines of the poem do not rhyme at all. Yet there are some instances where one can find the use of rhyming. As an example, in the second part of the first stanza, the words “red” and “dead” rhyme together. Thereafter, the poet mostly uses the iambic meter in this poem. For instance, the first line is in iambic hexameter. The following two lines are in iambic heptameter. While the second quatrain does not follow a specific metrical scheme.

### ➤ **Literary Devices**

Most of Walt Whitman’s poems use repetition and rhythm for rendering a spellbinding poetic beauty. He uses anaphora constantly as several verses begin with the same word/ phrase. For instance ‘When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomers’ uses ‘when’ 4 times to render a lyrical sound. Anaphora is generally used for joyous chants and rendering celebratory feelings in a poem’s entirety. ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ makes use of ‘father’ and ‘heart’ to mourn the death of assassinated Abraham Lincoln. Moreover, the fallen ship’s captain is a reference to Abraham Lincoln, whereas the ship is also an allusion to the United States of America during its early years of independence.

## ➤ Themes

Whitman emphasizes the importance of self in the majority of his poems, ranging from 'I Hear America Singing' to others, he prizes the American populace to believe in themselves. More so, he even uses symbolical allusions to drive home a point. He may use inanimate objects for that end. Apart from that, Whitman uses the themes of victory, lamentation, grief, sadness, and loss in his poem, 'O Captain! My Captain!'. Though this poem concerns the theme of victory, it contains a sad note on the death of Lincoln. The poet creates contrast by transposing the images of the joyous crowd beside the lifeless body of the captain. This concoction of emotions resembles the nature of life. Along with that, the themes of grief and lamentation are important aspects of this piece.

## ➤ Analysis, Stanza by Stanza

### Stanza One

*O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

In the first stanza of 'O Captain! My Captain!', the speaker shouts with sheer excitement to the ship's captain about making it home safe and sound. The ship after enduring tough storms and impenetrable winds made it back on the dock. Jaded and exhausted after a tiresome journey, the mission has been a roaring success. Although the ship is yet to arrive safely in the harbor, 'land ahoy', 'land ahoy' as the ship is close by and people are seemingly exulted by its sight.

The church bells are ringing and people act animatedly as the ship nigh the shore. The excitement escalates as the boat nears the harbor. The keel has been thrown in to steady the moving ship. The keel is a reference to a 'ship' as well, same as 'all hands on deck' means all people should be ready.

As the ship draws near the harbor, the poem takes on a dark turn, foreboding something unfavorable to be revealed. 'Grim and daring' are the terms referring to the twisting mood. The would-be ghost ship carries some unwanted news for the awaiting crowd.

Thereafter, he speaks from the heart. The heart has shattered and torn over the death of the ship's captain. The breakdown of emotions is surging from the sailor as the fallen comrade lies beside him, in all his glory but dead. Drops of blood are flowing on the ship's deck, the blood of Abraham Lincoln.

### Stanza Two

*O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
Here Captain! dear father!  
This arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead.*

The sailor implores the now dead captain to rise from the dead. The act of talking to the dead is known as an apostrophe. The reason being, the people ashore await their prized captain to lead the way and stamp his mark on history. The crowd is jubilant as they celebrate using some devices such as raising the flag in

victory, holding flowers, and cheering for the captain. The crowd is getting restless, as anticipation rises to catch a glimpse of their ship's captain. Alas! He's no longer with them.

In actuality, the ship's captain is not his biological father, but truly his respect and reverence for him stand greater than his actual father. The sailor looks at the fallen comrade and wishes this nightmare was just a dream. Alas! As the reality sets in, the sailor realizes, the damage is irreparable.

### **Stanza Three**

*My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

In the last stanza of 'O Captain! My Captain!', the sailor looks sadly at the dead captain in pure agony. He observes his lips to have paled a la that of a corpse. The captain fails to respond to his cries of helplessness. The liveliness from the captain's face has drained now. His pulse has stopped and he's unlikely to move from now on. The ship has landed safely in the harbor with its anchor thrown in. The voyage is now complete. The sailor reminisces about the trip to be extremely arduous yet they crossed the line with a trade-off.

The concluding lines of the poem explicate the fact that the sailor has some bad news to share with the awaiting crowd. He appeals directly to the loud jeers, cheers, and ringing bells for the much-awaited captain. Again, the poet uses synecdoche to represent the entire American audience at large as the poem relates to the death of Abraham Lincoln. The sailor feels uncomfortable as he needs to relay the bad news to the populace at large, as the victory celebrations come to a standstill eventually.

### **➤ Historical Context**

'O Captain! My Captain!' was authored by famous American poet Walt Whitman. It alluded to President Abraham Lincoln's death in 1865. The poem was a part of his controversially famous collection of poems "Leaves of Grass". The poetic collection continuously was revised to add new poetic pieces from Walt Whitman as a result. 'O Captain! My Captain!' at the time of its publication became an intensely popular poem for classic, read in schools over the years to come. For Whitman, the praise was redundant by all means. Commenting on his poetry, he said that the audience of his time appreciated poetry with form, rhyme, and meter, still unfamiliar to the free-verse concept. The poem moves its reader with utter undertones of remorse and sadness over the conclusion of the Civil War and its dramatic ramifications later, rendering a powerful period poem in the process.

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## Walt Whitman: Poems Summary and Analysis of "O Captain! My Captain!"

### Summary

The poem is an elegy to the speaker's recently deceased Captain, at once celebrating the safe and successful return of their ship and mourning the loss of its great leader. In the first stanza, the speaker expresses his relief that the ship has reached its home port at last and describes hearing people cheering. Despite the celebrations on land and the successful voyage, the speaker reveals that his Captain's dead body is lying on the deck. In the second stanza, the speaker implores the Captain to "rise up and hear the bells," wishing the dead man could witness the elation. Everyone adored the captain, and the speaker admits that his death feels like a horrible dream. In the final stanza, the speaker juxtaposes his feelings of mourning and pride.

### Analysis

Whitman wrote this poem shortly after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. It is an extended metaphor intended to memorialize Lincoln's life and work. The Captain represents the assassinated president; the ship represents the war-weathered nation following the Civil War; the "prize won" represents the salvaged union. The speaker, torn between relief and despair, captures America's confusion at the end of the Civil War. It was a time of many conflicting sentiments, and Whitman immortalizes this sense of uncertainty in "O Captain! My Captain!"

Whitman's poetry places a lot of emphasis on the individual. This particular poem explores a variation on that theme: the self vs. the other. The speaker struggles with balancing his personal feelings of loss with the celebratory mood resulting from the successful voyage. While the Civil War claimed many lives, it led to the reunification of the Union, so many Americans felt similarly divided. In Whitman's poem, the speaker believes that he should be part of the "other" group, celebrating the return to safety. However, his inner thoughts set him apart from the crowd as he tries to reconcile his emotional reaction to the Captain's death.

"O Captain! My Captain!" is the only Walt Whitman poem that has a regular meter and rhyme scheme. Often hailed as "the father of free verse," Whitman tended to write his poems without following any kind of ordered poetic form. However, "O Captain! My Captain!" is organized into three eight-line stanzas, each with an AABBCDED rhyme scheme. Each stanza closes with the words "fallen cold and dead," and the first four lines of each stanza are longer than the last four lines. Because this poem is an elegy to the dead, the more traditional format adds to its solemnity. Additionally, the regular meter is reminiscent of a soldier marching across the battlefield, which is fitting for a poem that commemorates the end of the Civil War.

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- "Battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won."
- "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

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